

## [The "Kingdom" Banquets]

Beliefs and Customs - Cults

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NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview [7?]

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 W. 135th St. New York City

DATE November 14, 1938

SUBJECT THE "KINGDOM" BANQUETS —FATHER DIVINE CULT.

1. Date and time of interview November 8, 1938
2. Place of interview
3. Name and address of informant Reported by Frank Byrd (staff writer)
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 W. 135th St. New York City

DATE November 14, 1938

SUBJECT THE "KINGDOM" BANQUETS —FATHER DIVINE CULT

Father Divine's banquets are famous. They have been for many years now, ever since the inauguration of the religious cult at Sayville, Long Island. Not until recently, however, has this writer availed himself of the opportunity to sit through the numerous courses of one of these colorful, gargantuan feasts. It was, to say the least, an unusual experience.

About nine o'clock in the evening the official feasting begins. Gathered about the Father are his legal satellites, staff members, personal attendants, followerw and sympathizers. The table is modeled somewhat after the accepted seating arrangement of Christ and his disciples at the Last Supper, with the exception of the fact that where Christ seated twelve Father Divine seats hundreds. Interested outsiders are segregated to side tables. They may eat at the huge winding banquet table only when they become members of the movement or come as invited guests of the Father or his followers.

The table is heavily loaded with fresh fruits of every description, whole hams, chickens, suckling pigs, legs of lamb, pig's knuckles, pork chops, baked breast of lamb, beef-stew, corn, cabbage, kale, spinach, potatoes, rice, celery, sliced tomatoes, large bowls

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2 of chopped lettuce and green peppers, cakes, pies, pitchers of coffee and milk. It is a gourmands dream, a hobo's heaven.

When the meal is well under way, Father Divine rises, beams (as only Father Divine can beam) and says in that crip, energetic way: "Peace, everyone! Righteousness, Justice and Truth, Good Health, with Good Manners and Good Behavior for you! By so doing and so being, we will have a righteous government in which to live. Is everybody happy?"

Judging by the almost uniformly beatic expressions on the faces of the angels, everybody was more than happy. And if there was any further doubt of it, the tremendous volume of answers in the affirmative was enough to dispel any possible lingering doubt. Not that there seemed to be any doubt in Father Divine's mind. He seemed quite sure of what the answer would be. In fact, while the "Thank you Fathers", "We're so happy's "Yes Father, you're so sweet" and so on were still filling the air, the good Father appeared impatient and not a little annoyed at not being able to go on with his piece. After all is quiet and serene again and the angels have resumed such mundane activities as polishing off an unfinished pork chop bone, or sopping up some fine, brown spare rib gravy, Father takes up where he left off and, apparently inspired by his own voice, warms up to his Message with all the fire and enthusiasm of a seasoned politician. Scribbling frantically at his elbow are a battery of alert stenographers who are busy recording, verbatim, every word of their leader for the subsequent edification of followers who were unable to be present, and, of course, for posterity.

Well, this goes on for one, two and well into three hours. I ask if this is the usual procedure. The answer is yes. "Maybe longer" I am informed of course the speaking does not go on uninterrupted for all this time. Speeches, as most speeches should be, were 3 occasionally interrupted with sudden outbursts of song. Two of the most popular were: "Father Divine is The Light Of The World" and "Fathers Got Me In The Palm Of His Hand."

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Many of the faithful even bring their musical instruments along with which they make additional extollations of the virtues of their diminutive leader. In between times, new converts imbued with the spirit or full of gratitude, get up and make open confessions of their great sins before they were taken under the protective influence of the Divine wing. Some of these stories are hair-raisers, others genuinely pathetic. One apparently well educated white woman, a Californian and member of the Divine movement for over three years, she said, sang Father Divine's praises to the highest. She said that a perpetual craving for alcohol had almost robbed her of her reasoning and not until she had quit her job and come to join Father Divine could she find and release from it and any continuous peace of mind.

"You appear to be quite normal." I ventured. "How do you find this business of sexual abstinence?"

"It doesn't worry me at all any more." she declared. "Of course, I'll admit that when I first came here, it bothered me a little, but with the help of Father, I've mastered it completely. Now, all men seem like brothers to me. I don't think of them in a physical way at all."

She seemed quite earnest and sincere and continued to explain to me how happy she was in the work of the Kingdom and in being a servant of "God".

"All I want in life," she said, "is to continue doing his will."

During these spasmodic testimonials, the angels, whenever they feel the spirit, break into song, speak in unknown tongues, shout

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"Thank You, Father.", declare "It's wonderful" extoll the sweetness of life and each other and vow undying love for and servitude to Father Divine. Even when they feel the urge to express themselves, they offer further proof of being only "His" children. They raise their hands, like children in a school-room, wave them frantically and, if they are recognized,

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rise and speak. If not, they remain dutifully quiet and politely yield preference to some other brother or sister. They may all sing at once but only one at a time attempts to talk.

Sometimes, when one is given the floor and feels too full of the spirit to adequately express it in words, he simply begins to sing. The tune is recognized and taken up by the others and the hall is soon and full and throbbing with music. Those with instruments improvise on the straight melody or often "come in" with only a soft, studied obligato. This may happen twenty or thirty times before the meal officially comes to a close.

Father Divine modestly accepts credit as composer of some of the Kingdom songs but in other cases, lyrics are made up by different angels to suit well-known Negro spirituals, operatic arias, or just plain Tin-Pan Alley tunes. In all of them, however, Father Divine is the lyric theme. They apparently never tire of singing their lord and master's praises.